

Discussion Questions

1. “Not enough was known about where those orphans *came from*. With orphans, too much is missing; there’s always something you don’t know” (page 7). Discuss the importance of familial belonging in *Queen Esther*. What does it mean to “come from” somewhere? How does the novel challenge or uphold your understanding of having a “home”?
2. From the Book of Esther, after which Esther Nacht is named, to Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, to Jimmy Winslow’s *The Dickens Man*, stories play a major role in *Queen Esther*. Discuss the role of stories and storytelling in the novel. What does it mean to “have a story”? How is the importance of storytelling to Jimmy similar to or different from its importance to Esther? Why do you think Jimmy is attracted to being a storyteller?
3. The threat of Hard Rain’s “alleged overreaction to thunderstorms” (page 227) hangs over Jimmy’s stay in Vienna. What role does Hard Rain play in *Queen Esther*, and how might we interpret her fear of thunderstorms? Is it significant that, when a thunderstorm does come, Hard Rain *doesn’t* “overreact” in the way Jimmy, Claude, and Jolanda have been anticipating?
4. “Hard Rain is a woman” is a phrase repeated several times in *Queen Esther*. It’s one of the first things Jolanda teaches Siegfried to say in

English, and it's what Jimmy writes in Siegfried's copy of *Roommates in Vienna* when they meet in Jerusalem. What is the significance of this refrain in the novel?

5. Although Jimmy is a heterosexual man, he is surrounded by sexual minorities: Honor is asexual, Jolanda is a lesbian, and Mieke is a lesbian who wants "to *try it* with a guy" (page 197). Discuss the portrayal of sex and sexuality in *Queen Esther*. What role does sex play in Jimmy's life? In what way does the novel either challenge or uphold traditional notions of sex and sexuality?
6. *Queen Esther* starts with a history of the Winslow family in America: "Beginning in Puritan times, more Winslows kept coming" (page 1). Why do you think the novel begins this way? What role does family history play in *Queen Esther*? How, if at all, does personal history intersect with national history?
7. In Chapter 8, we learn that Esther wants the following quote from *Jane Eyre* tattooed on her chest: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (page 71). Why do you think Esther is so drawn to this quote? What do you think Jimmy would make of it? If Jimmy were to get a tattoo, what words or image do you think he might choose?
8. "In *Great Expectations*," says Thomas Winslow to Jimmy, ". . . you will love the characters you're supposed to love, and you'll hate the ones you're supposed to hate" (page 138). How does Tommy's reading of *Great Expectations* play out in *Queen Esther*? Do you think we're "supposed to love" some people, and "supposed to hate" others? How does the novel reaffirm or complicate this conception of love and hate? Support your ideas with reference to the text.

9. Esther is left at the orphanage at St. Cloud's by two female "anti-Semites" (page 65); Jimmy is raised with two mothers and no father; Vienna, Jimmy's daughter, is raised with a father and two mothers; and Siegfried is adopted by Annelies when the anti-Semitic Irmgard dies. These are just a few examples of how motherhood is portrayed and reconfigured in *Queen Esther*. Discuss the novel's portrayal of mothers and motherhood. What do you think of the idea that "giving birth to a child and being a mother [are] two separate choices" (page 154)? Support your ideas with reference to the text.
10. "‘There *is* a telescope that sees into the future, Jimmy—it's called the passage of time. Just wait and see,’ [Irmgard] said, closing the door" (page 329). Discuss the significance of this quote, and of the passage of time more broadly, in *Queen Esther*. What does it mean to see into the future by means of the passage of time? From the very first Winslow on board the *Mayflower* in 1620, to Jimmy Winslow in Jerusalem in 1981, the novel covers a long span of time. How is the passage of time portrayed in the novel?